

UDK: 179.2:796.071:174

**Professional Article/Stručni članak**

Received/Primljeno 14/03/2011

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## Child abuse in top sport – ethical challenges

### ABSTRACT

Doing sport usually represents a positive experience. Unfortunately, we have started facing more and more examples of abuse and violence against children in relation to sport. The instances of child abuse is not only difficult define – it is a complicated ethical issue which require professional approach by a pedagogue, a kinesiologist, a psychologist, a physician and a sociologist. Generally, there are no data which would show the frequency and prevalence of abuse in sport, particularly in Croatia. Athlete's development is primarily affected by his or her sports talent and training process, but also by several external factors, predominantly: sports club, coach, co-players, family, school and social community. They can be at the same time the sources of different types of child abuse in sport and the relation of professionals and the society in general towards them is a serious ethical challenge.

A period in which young athletes are the most vulnerable and most exposed to abuse is a period in which they have the most to lose, the period of achieving high levels of sports results. Abuse and violence by coaches become acceptable and are generally tolerated if at the same time the athlete achieves noticeable results and is successful. That paradox presents the most serious ethical challenge in coaching children in top sport. Is it acceptable to move the limits of what is considered to be abuse and accept that abuse with the purpose of achieving top sports results?

**Keywords:** child, sport, abuse, ethical challenge

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## Introduction

Participation in various sports activities, doing organized physical activities is nowadays very popular and fun for children. When selecting a sports activity for their child, parents are most frequently led by known facts that sport and regular physical activity have positive influence on the whole psychosomatic development of children and youth and that organized physical activity positively contributes to a child's development. Other aspects of parental motivation to include a child in sports activity should not be neglected, such as fun and pleasure children feel while doing sport, development of psychosocial characteristics, as well as forming habits and awareness concerning the needs of their physical activity. The participation of children in sports activities make parents feel secure that their children spend their time usefully and with purpose at sports activities, while doing sports is a very positive experience for children themselves (Milanović et al. 2006).

Also, parents expect that during the period spent on doing sports, the children will be in a safe surrounding, isolated from various types of socially unacceptable behavior. As a rule, sport is related to many positive and desirable characteristics – sport leads the children and youth the "right way". Doing sport is mostly a positive experience.

However, there are many dangers hidden in sport, as well, and there is a series of ethical dilemmas. One of the most frequent dangers and at the same time the greatest ethical dilemma, can be found in the training of children and youth. There is an apparent inconsistency in defining the limits of acceptable behavior and relation towards children athletes. Parents tolerate the kind of behaviors by coaches towards their children, which they would not tolerate by any other person. It is that boundary of acceptable behavior towards children that has been moved and we can actually talk about the child abuse in sport. Child abuse is a significant problem which has been given a lot of attention by both professionals and wider public. By child abuse we primarily mean physical, sexual and emotional child abuse in a family. However, we have to keep in mind that child abuse is also present in other segments of society in which children participate. The aim of this paper is to show some of the possible factors and ways of child abuse in sport and bring the attention to the ethical inconsistencies in treating the problem of child abuse in sport.

In the lack of research in the field of child abuse in sport, there is also a lack of concrete indicators which would enable the description of the situation in Croatian sport. There is no doubt that child abuse in sport does exist and it manifests itself in several ways. Unfortunately, this topic has never been covered adequately so there was no possibility for it to become of central interest to the Croatian professional

sports public, but we do know of cases of both male and female athletes in Croatia, which provoked discussions on the topic of abuse. In addition to usual reasons, such as failing to report and register child abuse, when it comes to abuse in sport, there are several more examples. For instance, inconsistency in the literature regarding defining the limits of acceptable behavior and abuse in sport, and in the case of Croatia also the lack of professional services' care of children athletes and possible cases of abuse, as well as the lack of public awareness about the fact that it is possible to experience different types of abuse in sport and that it does happen (Milanović et. al 2006).

The most frequent type of mistreating children in families nowadays is negligence. However, that problem has been long "neglected" by both the public and professionals even though it is more frequent than abuse, and it has equally serious consequences (Erickson and Egeland, 1996). This type of abuse is present in sport as well so the attention has to be brought to this issue. As Sesar and Sesar (2008) say, child negligence is closely connected with abuse, and according to literature, far more frequent than physical abuse. Physical consequences of negligence, such as malnutrition or lack of parental care about the protection from injuries, are often the only cases of negligence which are given attention.

## **Children participation in sport**

Places in which children can participate in organized sports training and sports activities, under the supervision of professionals are sports clubs and school sports societies. Sports clubs perform the function of training children and under the auspices of local, county and national sports federations organize competitions for different age groups. On the other hand, school sports societies organize extracurricular sports activities, while Croatian School Sports Federation, as the umbrella organization of school sports and county school sports federations organize competition in school sports. So we can conclude that there are two systems in the Croatian sports system, which offer children sports activities.

Sports clubs system is based on financial interests which is reduced to care of the regular payment of membership dues, strict selection of athletes so only the best ones remain and those who will help them bring profit, possibility of getting sponsorships from rich parents and so on. A child athlete will recognize that he or she is being respected if his or her parents are actively involved in his or her sports activity – provide support, satisfy specifics "sports" needs and accept obligations which are dictated by a sports club and child's engagement in sports activity (Milanović and Milanović, 1992). Such harsh terms of selection and merciless expelling, training

system and non-existence of B team in which a child could fulfill his or her needs for sports activities, needs for safety and belonging and love, esteem and the need for self-realization, frequently lead to giving up sport and to unwanted consequences both for a child athlete and a society in general.

According to data of the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (DZS) in 2009 in Croatia there were 4,165 sports associations with the total of 284,365 athletes. Out of that number 19% or 53,504 were women athletes. This means that only 6.4% of the total Croatian population on all levels of competition and all sports branches, including Croatian University Sports Federation, Croatian Paralympics Committee, Croatian Deaf Sports Association, Croatian Federation for Sports Recreation Sport, Croatian School Sports Federation, etc., are involved in sports activities (tables 1 and 2)

*Table 1. Number of sports societies and active members in 2009 (DZS, 2010)*

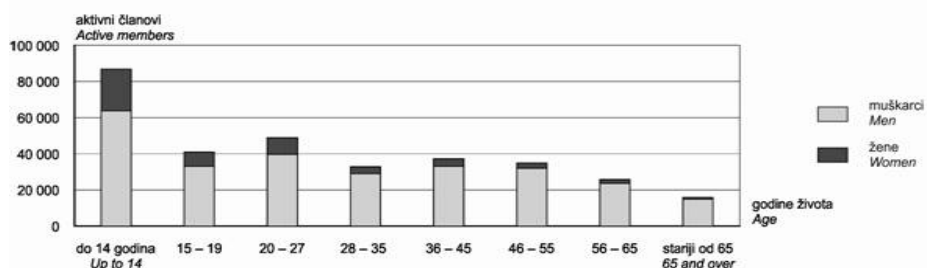
Number of sports societies	Active members		
	total	men	women
4.165	284.365	230.861	53.504

*Table 2. Age structure of active members of sports societies in 2009 (DZS, 2010)*

Age															
Up to 14		15 – 19		20 – 27		28 – 35		36 – 45		46 – 55		56 – 65		65 and over	
total	women	total	women	total	women	total	women	total	women	total	women	total	women	total	women
85.974	22.874	40.546	7.816	46.427	9.097	28.201	3.757	30.122	4.027	25.135	2.878	17.450	2.040	10.510	1.015

Age structure of members of sports societies in 2009 (table 2 and graph 1) shows that 71% consist of children and citizens up to the age of 35, in total 201,148. The least number of members is in the group of citizens older than 65. Most members are in the age group of up to 14 (26.9%) and 15-19 (12.7%), i.e. a total of approximately 126,000 children and youth is engaged in sports activities (graph 1).

**Graph 1. Age structure of active members of sports societies in 2009 (DZS, 2010)**



School sports societies have the advantage over the sports clubs in certain segments but there are also disadvantages. Participation at school sport competitions which motivate children for engaging in sports activities in a school sports club, more relaxed selection criteria, bigger offer of sports facilities are some of the positive aspects of school sports. On the other hand there is a weak financial motivation for professionals, the issue of quality athletes leaving school clubs and the lack of more quality and frequent competitions are only some of the negative sides of school sport in Croatia.

## Ways of child abuse in sport

Taking into consideration the significance of training and doing sports activities for children, we can conclude that the surroundings in which that sports activity takes place is, along with the school, child's home away from home. In accordance with that, from the professional aspect, it is necessary to organize the best possible professional care for children in sport. Unfortunately, in many situations this care is lacking which leads to violence against children. There are four basic types of violence discussed in current literature. (Miljević-Ridički, 1995) They include physical, emotional and sexual abuse and negligence.

## Physical abuse in sport

Physical abuse of children athletes can be observed through two different approaches. The first one refers to physical abuse which implies general perception of child physical abuse which is manifested and recognized through most frequent signs, such as: bruise, burn, bite, hair pulling, broken bones, etc. The second approach is more frequent when it comes to abuse of children athletes. Coaches who are not educated enough and do not understand the training process and its specific ele-

ments, subject children to trainings which lead to a higher possibility of injuries. Coach's verbal and non-verbal messages and stimulations affect all segments of child's development. They are primarily aimed at the achieving specific training goals, but on purpose or accidentally, productively or contra productively, with or without the goal, they also affect other needs of a child and shaping child's personality. These messages highly influence achieving top sports result, but also the quality of child's livelihood and growing up. A coach is a significant factor in long term sports preparations which include all types of educational process (Milanović, Milanović 1992). This type of child athletes' abuse might be significantly reduced by insisting that only trainers holding a degree in kinesiology can conduct trainings of younger athletes (Milanović et.al 2006).

Unfortunately, in Croatia a great number of coaches without the appropriate degree work with children and they do not have enough professional nor pedagogical knowledge necessary for conducting a successful training process with the younger age groups. Inappropriate training can increase the number of injuries, and is considered as child abuse by a coach. According to the newest data of the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2010), in Croatia currently there are 12,574 sports coaches. Out of that number the total of 7,330 or 58.3% are qualified for that job (62% in 2006). 5,244 (or 41.7%) of coaches are not qualified for the job. These include all types of qualification (table 3). The number of unqualified coaches is rising and it is necessary to take measures in order to stop that negative trend.

*Table 3. Persons performing professional duties in sports in 2009 (DZS, 2010)*

Workers performing professional duties in sport							
total	men	women	volunteers	full time	part time	qualified	unqualified
12.574	10.964	1.610	11.217	807	550	7.330	5.244

## Emotional abuse in sport

Term emotional abuse is used in Croatian literature (Puhovski, 2002; Pećnik, 2003; Kocijan Hercigonja, 2003 according to Ždero, 2005) while the foreign literature uses various terms. Emotional abuse refers to continual, repetitive emotional response to a child's emotional expression and behavior which accompanies it. It inhibits child's capacity for spontaneous, positive and appropriate emotional expression (O'Hagan, 1993, according to Iwaniec 2000). The examples of emotional abuse in sport refer to inappropriate coach's reaction in particular situations to emotional expressions of a child athlete. Emotional abuse in sport is presented by a re-

petitive pattern of coach's behavior that shows the child that he or she is worthless, unloved, unwanted and that he or she is only the means of satisfying other's needs or is intimidated by threats of physical and psychological abuse. (modified according to Brassard, Hart and Hardy, 1991, according to Hart et al., 1996). Emotional abuse during training can be defined as a destructive behavior of a coach toward a child athlete which includes (modified according to Buljan–Flander, Kocijan–Herigonja, 2003): terrorizing or attacking a child athlete with continual verbal insults, pressure put on a child and which arises from coach's need to achieve a sports result which cannot be achieved by a child because of his or her psychobiological and sports development phase. Milanović and Milanović (1992) recognize three types of coaches for young athletes: strict and critical coach, gentle and nurturing coach and a coach who is a realistic person with autonomy. Usually, the strong and critical coach is the one more prone to emotional abuse of children athletes than other two types.

Some of the characteristics of potential abusers include:

- coaches whose do not have the appropriate degree, thus lack in sufficient knowledge and capacity to understand the child athlete and have insufficient knowledge about the development, biological and training characteristics and specific moments of the children athletes,
- coaches who have, because of various reasons, lost the objective criteria related to the needs of children athletes and have a distorted image on how children athletes should behave,
- coaches who are not able to control their own behavior
- coaches under stress and existential pressure to achieve a sports result, coaches who were during their careers abused themselves and do not know of different ways of training and pattern of working with children athletes.

## **Sexual abuse in sport**

Literature which covers sexual abuse states that the abuser is usually a person whom a child believes and knows well: a parent, a relative, a grandfather, a grandmother, a teacher, a coach... Sexual abuse is defined as sexual act forced on the child who is not emotionally, motivationally or cognitively developed fore such an act. The capability to coax a child into a sexual act is based on the position of power and dominance of an adult perpetrator. Authority and power enable an abuser to implicitly or directly, coerce a child to participate in a sexual act (Buljan–Flander, Kocijan–Herigonja, 2003). Compared to other types of abuse in sport, sexual abuse has been more investigated (Brackenridge, 2001). Most papers published on this topic are on

the abuse of women in sport, but several researches have been dedicated to sexual abuse of children athletes. British National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) came out in 2002 with data on child abuse in Great Britain in swimming. In the period from 1997 to 2001 there were 78 reported cases of children athletes' (aged 11 to 17) abuse by their coaches. 68% included sexual abuse (NSPCC Report, 2002).

## **Child negligence in sport**

Negligence is the consequence of interaction of several factors on several different levels – individual, family and social. Exposure to negligence in childhood has destructive consequences on child's development and causes short term and long term emotional, cognitive, academic and social difficulties for the rest of the life (Sesar and Sesar 2008). Child negligence in sport refers to continual failure of a coach to fulfill the needs of children athletes for physical activity, which includes educational and emotional needs and failure to ensure supervision and safe training environment which influences child's physical and psychological development (modified according to Buljan-Flander and Kocijan-Hercigonja, 2003). The types of child negligence can be divided as follows: physical negligence of children athletes, emotional negligence of children athletes and educational negligence of children athletes (modified according to Sesar and Sesar, 2008). Physical negligence is the most widespread and recognized type of negligence (Briere et.al, 1996). This type includes: withholding health protection which is in accordance with physician's recommendations for particular injuries, illnesses, medical conditions or inflictions; untimely providing of health care, leaving the child without previously ensuring proper care and supervision and other ways of neglecting child's safety and well-being (modified according to Gaudin, 1993). Emotional negligence in sport, on the other hand, includes lack of expression of positive emotions in front of the child, as well as towards the child and lack of emotional support and care during training and competitions; taking alcohol or opiates in front of the child or encouraging child to take them or lack of reaction and help if the coach has been informed of the child's taking addictive substances: encouraging or allowing deviant and delinquent behavior in situations in which a coach is aware of the seriousness of a problem but does not want to intervene; failure to provide a child with necessary and possible treatment for his or her emotional or behavioral difficulties or problems in accordance with professional recommendation; untimeliness or delaying in finding or providing necessary treatment for a child's emotional or behavioral difficulties or problems (depression, suicide attempts, etc.) and other ways of not satisfying child's emotional



needs, such as: setting unrealistic expectations that are not in accordance with child's age or level of development, overprotection etc (modified according to Gaudin, 1993, Ždero, 2005).

Educational negligence of a child athlete may be defined as failure of a coach to cooperate, help and motivate a child during educational process within a sports training (modified according to Briere et al. 1996). The listed types of negligence, which do not have visible, physical consequences, are not given significance and it is necessary to develop awareness on how these types of negligence have the same emotional consequences on children as physical abuse and negligence (Sesar and Sesar, 2008)

## **Legal regulations**

In most societies, most fields of human activities are legally regulated. Some are regulated well, and some are not. A great number of activities related to protection of children and their rights brought through the adoption the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) whose article 19 states that children have the right to protection from any kind of violence. What is the situation like in Croatia? The basic law which regulates sport is, of course, Sports Act, adopted in 2006 (Official Gazette 71/06). Sports Act regulates many issues, including the issue of performing professional jobs in sport and the issue of health protection of athletes. These two parts of the Act define and proscribe who is allowed to work in sport as a professional, and this includes work with children athletes, as well. On the other hand, the part related to the health protection of athletes refers to athletes and children in general, but school children, as the most vulnerable group of the sports system in Croatia, are mentioned only within regulation of competitions of school sports societies.

A new draft of the Act should include a part which refers to the need to reduce and eradicate the possibility of abuse in sport and provide quality legal regulations which would help solving the issues put forward in this paper more efficiently. Furthermore, it is necessary to emphasize that the existing Act offers excellent possibilities related to solving the issue previously mentioned, and that is that the great number of coaches without sufficient qualifications work in the field of sport, and work with the most vulnerable population. According to the Sports Act (Official Gazette 71/06) supervision of legality of work of sports system's legal persons and their general acts is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Science, Education and Sport. Should the provisions of the law be broken, there are mechanisms proscribed under the heading of "penalty provisions". This part provides penalties for those who break the provisions of the Act. However, it should be mentioned again that the issue of child abuse and negligence deserves additional provisions in the Act.

## Conclusion

Participation at various sports activities, engaging in organized physical activities nowadays is very popular and fun for children. Numerous surveys have shown that organized engaging in physical activities positively contributes to child's development. Other aspects of parental motivation to include a child in sports activity should not be neglected, such as fun and pleasure children feel while doing sport, development of psychosocial characteristics, as well as forming habits and awareness concerning the need for physical activity. According to the newest data of the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2010), in Croatia currently there are 12,574 sports coaches. Out of that number the total of 7,330 or 58.3% is qualified for that job (62% in 2006). 5,244 (or 41.7%) of coaches are not qualified for the job. These include all types of qualification. These data show the need for further research and more detailed analysis of this issue. There are four basic types of violence discussed in current literature. (Miljević-Ridički, 1995) They include physical, emotional and sexual abuse and negligence.

Each of these types has been analyzed through participation of children in sports activities. Children athletes are the most vulnerable and most exposed to abuse when they are in the period of achieving high levels of sports results. Abuse and violence by coaches become acceptable and is generally tolerated if at the same time the athlete achieves noticeable results and is successful. That paradox presents the most serious ethical challenge in coaching children in top sport. Is it acceptable to move the limits of what is considered to be abuse and its acceptance with the purpose of achieving top sport results?

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